

*"I am the good shepherd"*

"I am the good shepherd". I think you should be aware of the technical issues. If these are words of the Lord in Hebrew or Aramaic, there is no word for "am". The probable literal translation would be "I <am> he, the good shepherd", and the combination of "I" and "he" may call to mind YHWH, particularly in writing without word division. In Greek, a similar effect may be intended, for "I am" is repeatedly found in Exodus 3 (Septuagint) as the self-identification of God. John wrote in Greek; but he may well have thought in Hebrew. Either way, John is knowingly putting into Jesus' mouth a claim to authority and status which is either true or blasphemous.

William Temple makes much fuss about the word "good", and suggests "I am the shepherd, the beautiful one". If we were translating Plato, sensitivity to precise verbal difference is needed. But this is a rougher Greek. I doubt the distinction works here – and there is only one word in Hebrew.

There is a stated antithesis between the good shepherd and the "hireling". I do not think we are meant to identify a particular ruler here. The Jews had suffered too many of them; both the descendants of Herod and the Romans were aliens whose agenda was not the good of the Jews. The danger of the antithesis is that Jesus appears in the same line of business as they were. This is of course corrected later: "Are you a king, then?" "My kingdom is not of this world". But that does not take away the truth that the shepherd exercises authority. We are under that authority; the Church is a theocracy, not a democracy. There can only ever be one Head; whatever respect we give to the hierarchy or to the people of God, their authority is derivative and only for Christ's purposes.

"One flock, one shepherd". The tough-minded insist that this is true; that they *are* that flock and all others are in error. So Rome; so (in general) the Orthodox; so some of the more dogmatic "reformed" bodies. Rather rarely, such a claim was even made for the Church of England. It is not, thank God, made by TAC.

Another view is that it *must be* true and, since *visibly* it is not, therefore the true Church is invisible. I do not think that we can be let off the hook that easily; *practical* unity is a clearly stated duty and practical division is wrong, whatever excuses there may be for any particular body at any particular time. However, the brief moment of "ecumenism" has passed. Unity schemes have failed. That does not seem to be the route to "one flock, one shepherd". The least bad remains, which TAC follows – continue in the ancient ways, so that things do not get worse, and explore any opportunity for unity which appears – so it be by corporate reunion and not by individual "conversion".

Unity may be impossible, but the Anglican way has been to learn from other Christian bodies. We adopted some Lutheran and Wesleyan hymns. We made cautious use of Roman Catholic spirituality. We selectively restored various pre-Reformation practices. We even began to explore Orthodox devotions, and (generally inadvisedly) aspects of their liturgy. We did well. Whether we are fully in the "one flock" or not, we will continue to learn from those that may be.

I have rather jumped over the implied argument in the text. True claim or blasphemous? John makes two related points. An implied but obvious test: "by their fruits ye shall know them". Jesus is in his earthly ministry very different from the hireling. If the one is obviously evil, the other is good and *might*, therefore, be of God. But more specifically "I lay down my life for the sheep". He cared "unto the end" - as far as the way went, both in depth and duration, and it went to death. Practical loyalty to the will of the Father is the first test. The application of that test to ourselves is obvious.

The second point is that this is only possible because of the relationship with the Father. "Even as the Father knoweth me, and I know the Father". For John, this mutuality is the key to everything. No prophet ever claimed so much. (Compare Hebrews 3 for the way Moses is faithful as a servant, not as a Son.) The stakes are raised, for this claim to relationship is again either true or blasphemous. It is a repeated feature in the arguments with the Jews in this gospel.

So how do we know? To die on the cross is to be by implication a blasphemer. (A Roman way of execution delivers a Jewish meaning.) But to be raised from the dead is the strongest case that the witness had been true throughout. God vindicates his Son and by that very act declares his claim to be true.

*The readings are those of the Sunday in the Prayer Book.*